UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

THE POETRY OF J. V. CUNNINGHAM

BY

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(C)

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Abstract

At a time when many poets have renounced rhyme and meter, J. V. Cunningham has revived plain style verse in tightly controlled, intricately constructed short poems and epigrams about such things as evil, moral choice, and the relationship of the self and the divine. Following an introduction explaining how poetry is a moral pursuit and the poet's choice of style is a moral decision, the thesis discusses Cunningham's achievements through a close examination of selected poems and of the moral position underlying them.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This thesis aims at a close examination of some of the work of American poet J. V. Cunningham (1911-1985), formerly Professor of English at Brandeis University. I intend to clarify some of the moral principles in Cunningham's poetry, to examine some of the doctrines, literary and extra-literary, underlying his work, and to consider what Cunningham has achieved as it reflects upon work very different from his--the bulk of modern poetry. The thesis proceeds from the belief that poetry is a moral discipline and the form of a poem is a function of its moral content. The formlessness of much modern poetry corresponds to the separation of reason and the imagination in the mind of the poet and results in the blurring of moral distinctions. In reviving poetic form Cunningham facilitates the reunion of reason and imagination and the realization of moral truth. At a time when many poets have renounced rhyme and meter, Cunningham revives plain style verse in tightly controlled, intricately constructed short poems and epigrams about such things as evil, choice, and the relationship of the self and the divine.

I shall not look at all of the poet's work but at certain significant poems that either exemplify an important

stage or turning point in the poet's development or make a point especially pertinent to an examination of his achievement, and at certain of his theoretical and critical comments in prose that do the same. Cunningham has done us the service of writing in some detail about his poetry and its development, and I shall call on that prose, particularly The Quest of the Opal, for clarification and authority.

I define morality in the first instance as the ongoing attempt to find meaning in experience. One commonly thinks of morality as a code of conduct, such as the Ten Commandments, but I wish to emphasize that such a code is only truly moral if it promotes some understanding of the meaning of experience. Along the same lines, mere adherence to a code constitutes a far less developed moral intelligence than does comprehension of the value the code identifies. This broad definition, then, is by way of approaching the larger purpose of moral behavior. This is pertinent because the modern rejection of established codes of behavior, such as we will discuss as the subject relates to poetry, may be, as well, a rejection of the meaning these codes embody. When Cunningham speaks of "madness," for example, in his poem "For My Contemporaries," he speaks of the consequences of blindly dismissing the capacity for the discovery of meaning inherent in the cultural and poetic tradition.

Poetry has the capacity to make explicit very subtle

and complex experiences (and one may consider the understanding of an experience as an experience, as well). The subtlety and complexity of the experience is reflected in the poet's control of the form of the poem. Both the poet's control of this form and the reader's appreciation of that control open up the possibility of one's grasping most completely the experience conveyed. A formless "poem" can convey only a formless experience. The more achieved the articulation of the experience, the greater is the potential for meaning, for the realization of value, hence the greater is the moral achievement. In the subtlety and complexity of its articulation, then, poetry offers, to those who seek it, the pursuit of moral development:

> Poetry . . . should offer a means of enriching one's awareness of human experience and of so rendering greater the possibility of intelligence in the course of future action; and it should offer likewise a means of inducing certain more or less constant habits of feeling, which should render greater the possibility of one's acting, in a future situation, in accordance with the findings of one's improved intelligence. It should, in other words, increase the intelligence and strengthen the moral temper; these effects should naturally be carried over into action, if, through discipline, they are made permanent acquisitions. (Winters, In Defense of Reason 28-29)

Briefly, then, poetry renders experience into words, and the value or quality of a poem may be measured in the weight of the experience rendered and the adequacy of its style. Some experiences are more valuable than others--they represent a greater moral achievement, and some words for describing these experiences are better than others--they

are clearer, more precise, more moving. Prose also renders experience into words and words into forms; the difference is that poetry is written in metrical language and often in rhyme. Given the achievements within the tradition of poetry, mere words, lines, or sounds in themselves do not make a poem; a poem necessitates the skillful combination of these into metrical forms, is the product of deep thought and moral struggle, and is among the highest of literary achievements.

Morality is traditionally assumed to pertain to all human endeavors, and it is probably safe to say that, at one time, most of what is said above could have been left unsaid. But codes of conduct, concepts of right and wrong, good and evil, are no longer so widely held as in the days when one could say that poetry is verse and expect no disagreement. The widespread abandonment of traditional poetic forms coincides, in this century, with the abandonment of other traditions, codes of conduct, or moral guideposts. A poet such as Cunningham who revives poetic form struggles not only with literary fashion but with the denigration of values and beliefs that have informed the literary tradition. His task is arduous, but then his achievement is all the more noteworthy. Whereas an earlier poet might have been bolstered by a framework of religious thought, much of that framework now lies in ruins.

Ben Jonson's poem, "On My First Son," might serve as an example. Though not explicitly Christian, the poem

interprets the poet's experience of the death of his son in terms of sin, divine justice, and (implicitly) the promise of the afterlife in the terms of the religious context in which Jonson lived and wrote. The poem makes pertinent religious concepts often lost to the modern reader and thereby brings meaning to what would to many seem a hopeless and meaningless experience. The poem's achievement lies in its power to move us and to make sense to us over and above a specifically religious point of view through the poet's truthful rendering of the experience. Such a poem comes as close as it seems literature can to discovering a moral truth, accessible to everyone, and this achievement, made possible through subtle and complex articulation, accounts for the poem's longevity. It informs experience with meaning.

The attempt to find meaning in experience--the broad definition of morality--involves the joint operation of two principles:

> The two fundamental principles of morality in the Western tradition [are]: 1) the principle of dignity, or of responsibility to the external fact, in the special form of respect for another person as revealed in his works; and 2) the principle of love, the exercise of sympathetic insight, or of imaginative transformation. (Cunningham, Collected Essays 126)

These two principles are represented in poetry in the denotative and connotative aspects of any particular word. A word's denotative meaning speaks to the principle of responsibility to the external fact, and its connotative

power furthers the exercise of imaginative transformation. Poetic achievement necessitates the simultaneous control over both these aspects or qualities. Yvor Winters explains:

> A poem is a statement in language about a human experience; since language is conceptual in its nature, this statement will be more or less rational or at least apprehensible in rational terms, or else the medium will be violated and the poem weakened. But language has connotation as well as denotation . . . for man is more than a merely rational animal. In so far as the rational statement is understandable and acceptable, and in so far as the feeling is properly motivated by the rational statement, the poem will be good. The rational and the emotional, denotation and connotation, exist simultaneously at every stage of the poem. (Forms xvii)

Much modern poetry, however, has been given over to the "exercise of sympathetic insight or of imaginative transformation" at the expense of rationality. As C. Q. Drummond explains, rational form in poetry is an invitation to find meaning in the most complete sense. Rational form, as he explains it, bespeaks moral intention in its potential for clarity, intensity, and, of course, accessibility:

> The most important characteristic of rational form is that it is predetermined and draws on the prior experience both literary and extra-literary of many people . . . .
>
> Because it draws on the prior experience of so many people, rational form is an obvious source of compression and economy in poetry. A poet's loosening of rational form thus reveals something about his attitude to other people and their experience. We value most highly those poems that speak most intensely to our private concerns while at the same time they address most authoritatively our common cultural and public concerns. Rational form makes possible, and is a means for, the economical expression of both the public and the

> private simultaneously, a mastery of the common inheritance without any slackening of individuality. (77-78)

J. V. Cunningham's achievement proceeds from his unswerving allegiance to the discipline of verse. One sees in the early Cunningham a recognition of the potential of verse, then a developing expertise, and, finally, a mastery of form in the epigrams for which he is probably best known. I shall discuss the attitudes Cunningham brings to verse, the demands of verse as a medium, the difficulties one encounters in Cunningham's complex ontological poems, and the philosophical position Cunningham arrives at after many years.

Although Cunningham has been greatly praised and commended by the few critics who have written about him (Winters, in 1967, called him, albeit with some reservations, "the most consistently distinguished poet writing in English today, and one of the finest in the language" [Forms 299]) he is often ignored. One reason for this may be that his poetry is very dense. Yet, given the obscurity of so many other and eminently more popular poets, I doubt that it is Cunningham's complexity that hides him from view. It seems that with the popular abandonment of poetry as a moral pursuit and the abandonment of poetry as verse, poetry such as Cunningham's finds little audience. His rationality, his wit, his compact style--his entire poetic attitude--is too far removed from the sensational, immediate, and sometimes apparently irrational attitudes of

so many of his contemporaries. Cunningham is quite capable of accounting for himself in the light of this, however:

> I have, for instance, as a poet been urged "to confront the twentieth century." The phrase is instant history, a tangle of doctrinaire prescriptions, written in the halls of academe. It implies the necessity of that Modernism whose memorial services are now being held. If my poems are not of their times, they are nevertheless part of the evidence for what the times are. (Collected Essays ix)

CHAPTER II

NEED

If an intelligent person wishes to become a poet, the seriousness with which he views that enterprise will greatly influence the kind of poet he will become. Seriousness refers not only to seriousness of intention but also to seriousness of opposition, that force of experience the poet confronts through articulation:

> The player at chess has an opponent. . . . The poet, too, has an opponent. His opponent is experience. The nature and quality of the game the two of them play will depend not only on his own skill but also on the adroitness and resourcefulness of his opposing experience. If experience is simple, unseasoned, without depth, the poet may have an easy time of it but the game suffers; it lacks depth and interest. And if the opponent is dishonest, if he throws away a queen to extricate the poet from a difficult spot, the game will be shoddy and not worth the playing. There are poems that are praised for their order, simplicity, and charm that so far as I can see represent a victory over nothing at all. (Collected Essays 137-138)

If one is willing to call Cunningham an anti-romantic, and it seems readers often are, one might well find in his background experiences that have challenged him to define that position. For example, his enthusiasm for learning, his classical education, his early fascination with the poetic revolution of the early twentieth century, and his struggles as a young man trying to establish himself are all

worth considering in this context.

Cunningham was so well acquainted with the bulk of modern poetry that by the age of nineteen he could say of himself that he had "completely entered into the modern poetic tradition. I had read it. I had selected it. I had appreciated it. I had not necessarily imitated it" ("Interview" 10). Since Cunningham came from the upper lower class ("The class I grew up in . . . did not write poetry" [Collected Essays 441]), this speaks of seriousness in both intention and opposition.

Cunningham was born in Maryland, the son of a steam shovel operator, and he grew up in Montana until the age of twelve when his family moved to Denver, Colorado. There he received a "somewhat old-fashioned education" at a Jesuit high school:

> . . . four years of Christian Education, four years of English, four years of Latin, two years of Greek, three and a half years of mathematics, three years of laboratory science--biology, chemistry, physics. And of course history. It was thorough, and I didn't find it oppressive. ("Interview" 4)

An interesting detail pertaining to the possible influence of this type of education on Cunningham's later interests in poetic form emerges from the interview he gave to Timothy Steele in 1983. Responding to a question about his interest in the rhetorical tradition, Cunningham explains:

> What I do believe was probably important was this. In the Jesuit high school, we used in English courses a series of textbooks called Model English. What I remember of those is that they involved the old exercise of imitation. I can

> recall being asked to take a paragraph of Macauley . . . and to write a paragraph on an analogous subject, keeping the same grammatical structure, the same complex or compound sentences, yet using totally different content.
>
> Now it was, I think, or could have been, this sort of exercise that gave me that feeling for what puzzles people sometimes when I speak of the form of a poem, meaning the inner form, the structure you would imitate if you were given this exercise. ("Interview" 16)

On his own as a wandering writer for trade journals at the age of nineteen, Cunningham decided, one winter night in Tucson, to try to get into university:

> People who do not know the area do not realize that, even in the warm days of winter, it gets pretty cold in Tucson at night. It gets down toward freezing. And I remember--and it is the turning point of my life--one early February night--I don't know how long I had thought about it or how it came to me--I sat down and wrote a letter to the only man I knew of, and had had a couple of exchanges with, who was associated with an American university, and asked him if it was possible to go to college and stay alive. This was Yvor Winters. ("Interview" 10)

Winters' generous offer to Cunningham of room and board in exchange for minor housekeeping duties enabled the younger man to get an education.

The dominant experience of his life, says Cunningham, was the stock market crash of 1929, a serious confrontation with reality by anybody's measure. It is indeed, as he describes it below, an event that might well mark a man. What emerges most notably from Cunningham's account is a considered sympathy for those most deeply affected by the crash. The evidence for that sympathy lies in Cunningham's insistence on the facts, his holding to the events he

witnessed:

> I recall, a few years ago, when the fiftieth anniversary of the Market Crash was being memorialized, going to one of the few cocktail parties I have gone to in recent years and coming up to a group of people who were discussing the crash. They were younger than I, and this woman said, quite positively and firmly, "I understand that very few people, much fewer than has ever been realized, lost their lives as a consequence of the Stock Market Crash." I looked at her and said, "I don't know what the statistics are; I only actually saw two." Which as a matter of fact I did. One in the large lobby of the Equitable Building, filled with people. I'd come back from a run, paused a moment before going into the office, and casually looked across the lobby, all the way across. A man put a gun to his temple and you heard the shot. Perhaps a day or two later, I was in the corridor, waiting for a call, when a body landed on the skylight within ten or fifteen feet of where I was standing. ("Interview" 6)

With characteristic brevity, Cunningham neatly refutes the woman's self-assured but secondhand account. Cunningham's remarks are at once factual and sympathetic. By testifying to these two suicides, he disarms the woman's potentially dangerous and dehumanizing reduction of a tragedy to a statistical abbreviation. Cunningham's plain, factual description prevents the subject from escaping into conjecture and irrelevance. The ironic modesty of his approach, "I only actually saw two," is a function of his moral position, capable of sympathy but adhering to fact; whereas the woman's statement is immodest--"I understand that . . ."--stagnant, and trivializing. This incident helps clarify a statement Cunningham makes in The Journal of John Cardan: "No dignity, except in silence; no virtue, except in sinuous, exacting speech" (Collected Essays 427).

Cunningham can understand the significance of the event because he has been deeply and immediately influenced by it, and, as we see here, he has made it significant through considerable reflection.

The principle to be accounted for when one looks at a poet's past in hopes of understanding the kind of poet he has become is what Cunningham calls the determinism of awareness:

> . . . one may reflect that if there be an element of determinism in human personality, other than the mechanical determinism of flesh and nerve of the impingement of external event, of necessity and chance, this determinism may very well reside in that awareness in the individual which from the beginning supplies the lines of approach and of action and which will, as it were quite unnoticed, demand the fulfillment in event, the artistic resolution in the real world, of its early perception. One's awareness conditions him and conditions the response of others. . . . We are determined by awareness, and we live only to accept and to adjust ourselves to the brutal fulfillment in the outer world of our insight. Premonition is destiny. Such at least will be the case when the attitude toward the situation is from the beginning adjusted to its necessary issue, though the full predication of necessity can only unfold in time. (Collected Essays 411)

The adjustment of attitude Cunningham puts forward here is what I have called seriousness.

"Mechanical determinism" and the "impingement of external event"--biology and history--shape awareness in accordance with an individual's nature. Cunningham was subject to separate, possible competing influences in his early life, the period roughly of his high school and university education. On the one hand, there was an

artistic revolution afoot:

> . . . that revolution in the arts, poetry among the rest, which began in the first decade of this century, culminated in the twenties, and achieved almost universal acceptance in the forties. I myself came into it in the late twenties, the latest possible moment to be touched by the original impulse. (Collected Essays 258)

And, on the other hand, there was the need for him to establish himself financially and professionally, given the limitations of what would now be called his socio-economic background:

> . . . there have been changes in society that do deeply affect poetry. The role of poet as professor or poet as dropout was not available to me when I was young; had they been, my life and poetry would have been different. (Collected Essays 441)

Raised as he was in a class and in a location separated from the cultural centre of the United States at this time, Cunningham's achievements are more greatly to his credit than one might offhandedly notice. For one thing, Cunningham was not seduced by the revolution, as many of lesser character would have been. A man of unusual intensity and perseverance, he was engrossed in it yet persisted in his own interests:

> Now the curious thing is that I got the Word, so to speak, alone. I really pursued it. . . . At the same time I was also reading--I really am astonished at how much I read; how much I understood is a different matter--the AnteNicene Fathers in translation and Swift's poems in the old edition. ("Interview" 7-8)

And the indulgence in literary fashion was not possible for a young man in his station.

"Montana Pastoral," a poem describing the harsh struggle to survive, bespeaks a writer with neither the leisure nor the inclination to indulge in easy sentimentality:

> I am no shepherd of a child's surmises.
> I have seen fear where the coiled serpent rises,
>
> Thirst where the grasses burn in early May
> And thistle, mustard, and the wild oat stay.
>
> There is dust in this air. I saw in the heat
> Grasshoppers busy in the threshing wheat.
>
> So to this hour. Through the warm dusk I drove
> To blizzards sifting on the hissing stove,
>
> And found no images of pastoral will,
> But fear, thirst, hunger, and this huddled chill.

Freelancing with his brother for trade journals at this time, Cunningham explains, "We ran into a sudden blizzard and stayed for some days at a little cabin just short of the top of Ratan Pass, just north of the New Mexico border. That experience was responsible for 'the huddled chill' in 'Montana Pastoral'" ("Interview" 9).

The poem's theme is need, and in addressing it the poem provides evidence for dismissing Romantic pastoral conventions as unrealistic and childish. There is in the specificity of details (names, locations, and times) a legal overtone appropriate to the O.E.D.'s primary definition of "surmise": "an allegation, charge, imputation; esp. a false, unfounded, or unproved [one]." Pastoral convention--"I am no shepherd"--is, in the evidence, found wanting, both in its depiction of the world generally and in its

significance to the individual who, in his need, finds it to be untrue.

The power of the poem derives from the way the evidence builds. In the larger scene, the poet, as can anyone, sees in the serpent, in the burning sun of May, in the destruction of the crop, and in the blizzard, the daily evidence of fear, thirst, hunger, and the need for shelter. The evidence is then made particularly significant with the phrase "So to this hour." The significance of the details comes to bear on the last line through the compression of the theme of need into a specific context and the compression of the needs specified into a single line. The poem thus demonstrates the defects of pastoral convention in the face of real need. A variety of Romantic sentiment deriving from leisure and carrying forward a falsified view of life, the convention appears meaningless under the circumstances in which the poet finds himself.

The use of details in this poem makes one uncomfortable with Winters' claim that "Cunningham is seldom perceptive of the physical universe around him; he does not know what to do with it" ("Plain" 303). Winters is correct inasmuch as Cunningham is characteristically more at home in the realm of ideas and of abstract reasoning, and in this poem the natural details are employed to underline the poet's anti-Romantic statement, "I am no shepherd of a child's surmises." Nonetheless, the "thistle, mustard, and the wild oat" are pertinent and carry the appropriate connotations of

the survival of the fittest and the tendency of nature to revert to the wild. However inclined to the abstract by temperament, Cunningham is capable of exact and vivid observation. What is most worth emphasizing, however, is that Cunningham's experience is complex, seasoned, and scrupulously honest, and he cannot, in good conscience, sentimentalize it and still adhere to the two principles of morality he has outlined.

CHAPTER III

THE CHOICE OF VERSE

Cunningham's confrontations with need have deeply affected him, shaping his attitudes toward life and toward poetry. His consequent effort at clarity and precise expression sets him apart from many of his contemporaries, as he remarks:

> Not that he claimed for himself the privileges of vatic exaltation; he had trifled with this attitude once under the pressure of the modern tradition in poetry and from a desire not to be found wanting in the dark pretensions of his early associates who were almost without exception congenital romantics. (Collected Essays 406)

He saw himself early on as "a professional writer, however laconic, one to whom poetry was verse." The choice of verse offered Cunningham an antidote to "vatic exaltation," a self-important pseudo-spirituality, yet the exigencies of structure encourage genuine spiritual expression. As Cunningham says, the challenge of verse is to refine thought and feeling through an exacting medium: "Rigor in poetry, as in science, is an instrument of discovery" (Collected Essays 266). Yvor Winters elaborates on this in In Defense of Reason:

> . . . the very exigencies of the medium as he employs it in the act of perception should force him to the discovery of value which he never would have found without the convening of all the conditions of that particular act, conditions one

> or more of which will be the necessity of solving some particular difficulty such as the location of a rhyme or the perfection of a cadence without disturbance to the remainder of the poem. (Defense 17)

And Winters continues:

> The spiritual control in a poem, then, is simply a manifestation of the spiritual control within a poet, and, as I have already indicated, it may have been an important means by which the poet arrived at a realization of spiritual control. . . . The conception which I am trying to define is a conception of poetry as a technique of contemplation, of comprehension, a technique which does not eliminate the need of philosophy or of religion but which, rather, completes and enriches them. (Defense 22-23)

But, while the discoveries of time and experience shall shape his work, Cunningham's earliest poems demonstrate the influence of that Modernism in which he was then so immersed. Cunningham wrote "Noon," for example, at the age of eighteen and "thinks," though neither he nor Winters is sure about it, that he submitted the poem to Winters in 1929 for publication in Gyroscope. In it we may see what Cunningham means when he says his early poems were

> an endeavour to attain, on the one hand, what may be called a poetic surface, with its attendant mastery of imagery, of human irrationality, or associative rhetoric, and of the full line in which sound and the choice of diction implicate feeling. (Collected Essays 408)

Noon

I have heard the self's stir,
Anonymous
And low, as on the stair
At time of Angelus

The worshippers repeat
An exorcism,
The angled clock's repute
Conjured with chrism.

It is a very accomplished poem for one so young, but it is also highly personal and, in this sense, subjective, and more successful in terms of sensibility than clarity. The poem succeeds inasmuch as the connotations, sounds, and movement of the words evoke feeling. In this respect, it is highly accomplished, but it lacks the weight of fully realized meaning.

In "Noon" something of the mystery of the Incarnation infuses the genesis of the individual, the "self's stir." The poem's near-rhyme ("stir"/"stair," "repeat"/"repute"), the unusual placement of dimeter and trimeter lines, and the irregular meter of the first line especially, may indicate an intuitive but untutored sense of the possibilities inherent in formal rigor. On the one hand, the poem suggests a mind grappling with the demands of form but not yet having mastered them. On the other, Cunningham's descriptions of his early poetic intentions suggest that mastery of form for the sake of clarity and the perfection of expression was not his goal. The form is not exactly coincidental to the content, but, judging from the remark quoted below, it is of less importance than in later work because it was not the poet's intention to be easily accessible. Furthering his explanation that he wanted the reader "to know that this was his poem, not yours,"

Cunningham says:

> The author, in fact, was only satisfied with a poem when qualification complicated qualification and yet the whole contrivance seemed to achieve stability and absoluteness by a coincidence with some given and simple external form. (Collected Essays 407)

Deliberately less precise or direct than later verse, this poem exemplifies early work that "offered to the reader a certain scheme of experience, certain progressions of thought and feeling from the first line to the last," and helps define the shift to the approach of later poems that were "direct statements of something he had to say, given form and definitiveness by the technique of verse" (Collected Essays 406). There is here "the poetic surface" in the connotations of a devotional exercise, itself carrying, especially with the word "exorcism," a suggestion of irrationality, partly because the Incarnation is itself an "irrational" event, conforming to no known law, and because exorcism connotes the fearful world of demonic possession with its attendant anarchy and chaos. Angelus is a Roman Catholic devotion commemorating the mystery of the Incarnation and is said at morning, noon, and sunset. Exorcism, in this context, suggests the purification of the self. "Conjured" here suggests that time is frozen or at least restrained by the devotion, specifically by the sacramental ointment. All in all, one has the impression of the self's awakening through divine means and of the essential self as unlimited in time or eternal, purified

perhaps in its removal from temporal restraints. The "angled clock," as well, suggests the limitations of time or of a temporal point of view (as opposed to an eternal one). These are all things brought to mind, and with beautiful language, but none of them is plainly stated.

Cunningham's development from the more obscure poetry of sensibility to the poetry of plain statement is a moral choice deriving from and carrying forward moral precepts such as civic responsibility, within the larger context of morality, the struggle to bring meaning from chaos. That struggle is necessarily "social and objective" so long as it involves language. It cannot be otherwise:

> Verse is a professional activity, social and objective, and its methods and standards are those of craftsmanship. It is a concern of the ordinary human self, and is on the whole within a man's power to do well or not. Its virtues are the civic virtues. If it lacks much, what it does have is ascertainable and can be judged. But poetry is amateurish, religious, and eminently unsociable. It dwells in the spiritual life, in the private haunts of theology or voodoo. . . . In that region the elected of God and the elected of themselves are scarcely distinguishable, and if the true oracle is nonsense to sense, so nonsense is often taken for oracle. (Collected Essays 406)

Modernism, says Cunningham, was characterized by the spirit of rebellion, a rebellion that has by now run its course:

> For why have generations of poets set out to destroy the iambic pentameter and its predecessor, the iambic octosyllable? Partly because it was the fashion, but also because traditional meter carries with it the rhetoric, subjects, attitudes, and values the revolution was directed against, the linguistic and social notions of correctness. But that rhetoric, those subjects, and those values have been lost. (Collected Essays 262)

Verse will reassert itself because of its potential more fully to realize meaning in language and because, finally, the revolution is bankrupt:

> We have lost the repetitive harmony of the old tradition, and we have not established a new. We have written to vary or violate the old line, for regularity we feel is meaningless and irregularity meaningful. But several generations of poets, acting on the principles and practices of significant variation, have at last nothing to vary from. The last variation is regularity. (Collected Essays 271)

As with any revolution, what is destroyed is often greater than what is gained, and what the revolution installs is often worse than what it set out to replace. What in another time might have been called spiritual pride ("vatic exaltation") is now considered poetic genius. "That region" ("where the elected of God and the elected of themselves are scarcely distinguishable") is a region of linguistic and moral confusion. Confusion is temporarily exciting, perhaps, but it is also dangerous:

For My Contemporaries

How time reverses
The proud in heart!
I now make verses
Who aimed at art.

But I sleep well.
Ambitious boys
Whose big lines swell
With spiritual noise,
Despite me not,
And be not queasy
To praise somewhat:
Verse is not easy.

But rage who will.
Time that procured me
Good sense and skill
Of madness cured me.

"For My Contemporaries" is a mature and refined poem of plain statement. The spare dimeter lines and forceful (one is tempted to say relentless) abab rhyme scheme provide the ideal vehicle for a poem unambiguously opposing pretence and egocentricity. "Good sense and skill" is a modest claim for the rigorous application of professionalism against what the poet regards as a dangerous and destructive overreaching. The poem bears the touch of an accomplished philologist: "queasy," for example, is defined in the O.E.D. as "Of the times or state of affairs: unsettled, troublous, ticklish" --a nice touch.

At issue in this poem are the moral implications in the attitude one adopts to art and to life. "Madness" is a serious word from a serious man; the madness of which the poet claims to have been cured is concomitant with the degeneration of sound and sense into "spiritual noise." One might understand this madness as a lack of the spiritual control of which Winters spoke earlier. Verse functions as a moral instrument by which one can gain control.

Cunningham's work is not a retreat from the main stream of poetic current or a mere reaction against it, but the progression of one once deeply immersed in it. The poem's apparent simplicity belies the weight of its judgment on the attitudes that have affected the poetry of our times and the

times themselves, since dissolution and hatred are not restricted to the arts. Nor is "rage who will" a very optimistic forecast. Perhaps that accounts for the attitude of resignation one can see beginning in this poem and which informs much of the later poetry. Winters offers an insight that appears to fit the predicament Cunningham finds himself in:

> During the Romantic movement a great deal of sentimental nonsense was written about the isolation of the artist, and the nonsense usually verges on self-pity. . . . The fact remains, however, that the artist, if he really is an artist, is really isolated, and his personal life in this respect is a hard one. There are few people with whom he can converse freely without giving offense or becoming angry. It is no accident that so many great writers have sooner or later retreated from society: they retreat because they are excluded. A first-rate poet differs from his contemporaries (and I include those who think of themselves as literary contemporaries) not in being eccentric or less human, but in being more central, more human, more intelligent. (Forms 305-306)

Perhaps resignation, then, is finally the most intelligent choice.

CHAPTER IV

HAECCEITY

One would be amiss in examining Cunningham's poetry not to look at certain poems that offer insights into what the poet concludes are basic truths about the nature of being. These poems, specifically the rather troublesome and puzzling "Haecceity" and "Agnosco Veteris Vestigia Flammae," are also important because they mark Cunningham's transition from an emphasis on sensibility to an emphasis on plain statement. We shall examine the poems in light of some serious criticism of them by Yvor Winters. Winters especially takes to task Cunningham's doctrine of "thisness" or haecceity, which one might begin to understand as the most primary of human compulsions, the compulsion "to be and to do some particularity." Cunningham maintains, if I understand him, that all choices arising from this compulsion are evil because the realization of being is itself evil. The more realized a thing is, says Cunningham, the less it partakes of all other possibilities for realization: the more removed from possibility, the more evil. The notion seems to hearken back to the old concept of evil as a defect in being, a lack of good. It would appear to be an anti-materialistic doctrine, a doctrine of idealism, even of religious mysticism. Winters seems to

dislike it very much, thankful "that it only affects a few of Cunningham's poems" (Forms 300). It may be that, indeed, it directly affects only a few of the poems, but I would argue that the mystical side of Cunningham informs a great deal of his poetry indirectly.

The doctrine of haecceity begins with what Cunningham calls the "quest of the opal." From his early work, such as the poem "Noon," Cunningham proceeded toward what he calls "the attempt to court and possess, and at the same time disinterestedly to understand, roughly what was then called sensibility" (Collected Essays 410). The opal symbol is a complex one, having to do with the fact that the opal "derives its color and attractions from flaws in the stone":

> If this were all, the flaws would be virtues. But any accidental sharp knock, as on the side of a basin while one is washing his hands, may cause the stone to crack; and though it remain in its setting for a while, in some unguarded moment the pieces will fall out, and one will have the ring without the jewel, the promise without the fulfillment. (Collected Essays 423)

The analogy is to the immediate. It too is susceptible to "some unguarded moment" because, like the opal, its attractions derive from "flaws." That is, the appeal of the immediate is only immediate. Should the moment fall from its setting--as would happen, conceivably if immediate experience were not united with or made meaningful to the personality--one would be left with "the promise without the fulfillment." The jewel and the ring, the moment and its context, need somehow to be kept together.

Cunningham says, "Hence it was a quest in which he succeeded for his own purposes and failed to all appearances, and need no longer feel any need of.". The quest was a failure, it would appear, in that the pursuit of sensibility is fruitless because of the very nature of sensibility:

> He saw now that the pursuit of sensibility had been the pursuit of an engrossment in the immediacy of experience, but immediacy by definition cannot be talked about, cannot yield a line of verse. Perhaps one sees himself immediately, which is as much as to say that the self is the self. But from this point of view, from the point of view of the concentrated duration of consciousness, all one's thoughts and actions are in an ultimate sense unreal. They are mistakes, if you will, since they are objectifications of the self and as such are other than the self; hence they have not the self's immediate validity except insofar as this is imputed to them by the customary psychic sleight of hand. (Collected Essays 421)

But the quest was also successful in that it led Cunningham toward plain statement, the style of his mature poems: "He returned to himself, to his own talent for the abstract and dry; he decided he was not a man of sensibility and gave up the quest. He undertook the pursuit of simplicity" (Collected Essays 423).

The doctrine of haecceity is founded on the premise that "all choice is error," a phrase that first occurs in the poem of the same title. Here is an excerpt:

> All choice is error, the tragical mistake,
> And you are mine because I name you mine.
> Kiss, then, in pledge of the imponderables
> That tilt the balance of eternity
> A leaf's weight up and down.

Some hint of what Cunningham means by the phrase is given earlier in the quotation on the pursuit of sensibility when Cunningham states that one's thoughts and actions are "mistakes, if you will, since they are objectifications of the self and as such are other than the self." Especially with the word "objectifications," Cunningham seems to be describing an idea of the self as something genuinely eternal, or, at least, something that exists apart from its thoughts and actions, which are of temporal necessity. In the phrase "all choice is error," one has a glimpse of a self as something striving to effect realization in a world that permits no genuine realization. Though such realization as it permits and necessitates is valid in its own terms, it is, by those same terms "error," inasmuch as the self is, ultimately, not a being limited to space and time. Such statements as "all one's thoughts and actions are in an ultimate sense unreal" would seem to indicate that the philosophical basis for the doctrine of haecceity lies in a recognition of eternity and a belief that what is essentially human is also eternal. Choice particularizes the will, which, unparticularized, encompasses all possibility:

> Perfection is in possibility, in the idea, but that which is realized, specific, determined, has no possibilities. . . . It is lacking in all the being in the universe other than its own particularity. (Collected Essays 412)

The doctrine is defined in the poem "Haecceity":

Evil is any this or this
Pursued beyond hypothesis.

It is the scribbling of affection
On the blank pages of perfection.

Evil is presentness bereaved
Of all the futures it conceived,

Wilful and realized restriction
Of the insatiate forms of fiction.

It is this poem or this act.
It is this absolute of fact.

Before going any further, we should note a lengthy passage from Cunningham's commentary on haecceity in The Quest of the Opal:

> It follows that the fundamental compulsion of one's life (Epigram 36) is not love, lust, gregariousness, the will to live, or any of the emotions or instincts assigned to man. It is that to live is at every moment to be and to do some particularity: in this respect what does not matter, only it must be something. The void must be specified. Loneliness is an intimation of the void which we attempt to defeat by some more notable specification. Haecceity, or thisness, is the primal and ultimate compulsion of one's life; it is the principle of insufficient reason. But there is considerable human danger in too sharp an awareness of this truth. For if choice is purely arbitrary, as essentially it is, there is no reason we should not be purely arbitrary in choosing. Hence one's choices may have in them a good deal of the precipitancy and doggedness of despair. (Collected Essays 412).

Yvor Winters says that the poem "which embodies this doctrine most clearly" is "Agnosco Veteris Vestigia Flammae." (The title, he explains in a gloss, is from the Aeneid but not otherwise related to it. It means "I feel the traces of an old flame.")

Agnosco Veteris Vestigia Flammae

I have been here. Dispersed in meditation,
I sense the traces of the old surmise--
Passion dense as fatigue, faithful as pain,
As joy foreboding. O my void, my being
In the suspended sources of experience,
Massive in promise, unhistorical
Being of unbeing, of all futures full,
Unrealized in none, how love betrays you,
Turns you to process and a fluid fact
Whose future specifies its past, whose past
Precedes it, and whose history is its being.

And it is best here to quote, as well, Winters' criticism of the poem:

> The poem is beautifully written, and it would be very moving if one could imagine the experience. But what we have here is a kind of mysticism of pure passivity (which would be unconsciousness), of retreat to the womb. The mysticism in question has no religious sanction, and its only philosophical sanction is a handful of assertions by Cunningham. Superficially it may seem to resemble the doctrine of Valery's Serpent, for the Serpent sees himself as evil because a creature (and therefore a sufferer of privation); but the Serpent seeks to increase his being by the mastery of more knowledge--that is, by further choice; and this, of course, is what Cunningham has done in fact. I have known Cunningham for more than thirty years; during these years, he has tried, as he tells us, to realize various choices in poetic form as precisely as possible. Yet his being (his intelligence) has increased, not diminished, from choice to choice. Cunningham is fully aware that he is more intelligent now than he was fifty years ago. (Forms 300)

In addressing the subject of haecceity generally and Winters' criticisms specifically, one might first agree that "Agnosco Veteris Vestigia Flammae" is indeed a mystical poem but question whether it is, as Winters put it, a mysticism of "pure passivity . . . of retreat to the womb." The mystical, says the O.E.D., has "a certain spiritual

character or import by virtue of a connection or union with God transcending human comprehension." The essence of Winters' criticism seems to be that Cunningham prescribes inaction or passivity in everyday behavior as a necessary consequence of the mystical insight expressed in the poem, which would be hypocritical on Cunningham's part and bad advice all round. The poems cited offer mystical insight as a starting point for comprehending ultimate ends (which are, of course, incomprehensible), but there is nothing in them that would deny moral necessity, as Winters suggests. Winters implies that it is impossible to imagine the experience of the poem. It may very well be so; yet that is what the poems invite us to do and not otherwise to extend our interpretation beyond the poems' context.

In "Agnosco Veteris Vestigia Flammae," "the old surmise" may refer to that insight "Haecceity" expresses and which first occurs in "All Choice is Error." The poet considers the relationship between love and the divine and concludes that love "betrays": "Turns you to process and a fluid fact." One has the sense, as one has with the earlier poems, that for Cunningham the being in time, necessitating, as it does, action, choice, and consequence ("Wilful and realized restriction" in "Haecceity"; "process and a fluid fact" in "Agnosco Veteris Vestigia Flammae"), is in its necessary embodiment of these conditions removed from ultimate being, the "Being of unbeing," which is ultimate in that it is "unhistorical/ . . . of all futures full,"

unaffected by temporal conditions. This seems a valid insight and one, to a greater or lesser extent, "transcending human comprehension." The insight, that is, contemplates time and eternity, the latter of which is, of course, beyond human comprehension but recognized as a valid concept nonetheless.

The poems offer some refinement of what Cunningham sees as crude, unworkable distinctions between reason and passion:

> If he accepts the classic solution in which choice is thought of as the inevitable result in action of reasoned and considered judgment, then choice is completely determined in such fashion that the moral agent may be assured he has inescapably moved toward the best. Hence what he moves toward will be best, hence reasonable, and appetite is confounded with judgment. (Collected Essays 412-413)

The refinement rests in the poem's recognition of the inevitability of ultimate ends in inaction, "unbeing." The pitfall of the classic solution lies in the very incomprehensibility of those ends; so that while reason is morally inescapable, the choices it posits become irrelevant in the context of the ultimate. "Reasoned and considered judgment" determines choice "in such fashion" as may be morally necessary and appropriate but inevitably limiting and potentially self-deceiving.

Cunningham maintains that to be is to be in some particular way: some particular thing at some particular time, and the compulsion to be is not particular about what. However, when Cunningham says that this compulsion "is the

principle of insufficient reason," Winters has argued that "to increase his being by the mastery of more knowledge--that is, by further choice--is what Cunningham has done in fact," which is to say that Cunningham has attempted to remedy the insufficiency by developing a sufficiency. But one might interpret "insufficient reason" to mean not that reason is a good of which man has not enough, but that it is itself, in whatever quantity, insufficient. Given this interpretation, Winters would be incorrect to say "the mysticism in question has no religious sanction," since Christianity seems to preach a similar mistrust of reason. I Corinthians 3:19, for example, says "the wisdom of this world is foolishness to God." And there are other, similar passages.

Cunningham might be said then not to be arguing against reason itself, but against faith in reason. To "accept the classic solution" is to be assured one has "inescapably moved toward the best." These phrases, as does the "hence" in "Hence what he moves toward," speak of an <u>a priori</u> faith in the inevitable goodness of "reasoned and considered judgment." Though indispensable to the world of realization, the existing world, reason is, as well, limited to that world, a world Cunningham finds evil by definition.

What, I hope, begins to emerge from this brief glance at the doctrine of haecceity is both an insight into the ability of poetry to communicate mystical understanding and an insight into why Cunningham abandoned "the quest of the

opal." Though the experience of poetry should be susceptible to explanation (it falls under the same laws that govern other methods of communication and under even more stringent laws applicable especially to poetry), the communication of mystical insight loses something in the translation. Mystical insight is, even more than the pursuit of sensibility, "an engrossment in immediacy of experience"--the experience of that which is, more than any other, ineffable. Hence a valid insight may concern matter beyond explanation. Winters objects to Cunningham's The Quest of the Opal as a whole because, in it, "it seems to me, he violates his own principle, for on many occasions he tries to read the text (the experience) back into the gloss (the poem)" (Forms 301). By his explanation of the mystery the poems encounter, in The Quest of the Opal, Cunningham brings that encounter to the level of everyday discussion. Even though mystical insight may be invaluable in this realm, it is "dangerous" to do this, as Winters put it. In light of Cunningham's explanation, Winters has no choice but to present an argument grounded in his "bucolic distrust of all theories which seem to be in obvious conflict with the facts of life" (Forms 303). The Quest of the Opal is fascinating reading, but it does invite seemingly unsolvable interpretative problems. Winters' approach suggests that he feels the poems should be left alone to speak for themselves.

There is another poem one should examine in this chapter, "Reason and Nature."

Reason and Nature

This pool in a pure frame,
This mirror of the vision of my name,
  Is a fiction
On the unrippled surface of reflection.

I see a willowed pool
Where the flies skim. Its angles have no rule.
  In no facet
Is the full vision imaged or implicit.

I've heard, in such a place
Narcissus sought the vision of his face.
  If the water
Concealed it, could he, drowning, see it better?

I know both what I see
And what I think, to alter and to be,
  And the vision
Of this informs that vision of confusion.

Winters objects to the poem's method:

> A great part of the poem is devoted to the pool, yet the pool as such is unrealized, is a dead pool; its details are stereotyped. . . . the argument is all but crowded out by the uninteresting remarks about the pool. (Forms 302)

But his strongest remarks concern Cunningham's explanation of the poem, which, says Winters, "as far as my limited understanding goes . . . eliminates any justification for Cunningham's poetry or for any other poetry" (Forms 303). This is the essential part of Cunningham's explanation:

> What we call the real pool, the pool of sensation and experience . . . is not unrippled. Though the alterations of its surface be as minute as the slight waves caused by skimming flies, these results of chaos and change will exemplify no given rule. . . . Our experience does not validate induction, just as our postulates have as such no reference. (Collected Essays 422-423)

Winters probably most objected to that last sentence, since in everyday life experience not only validates but necessitates induction. One might argue, however, that the poem is not about everyday experience per se. It offers, rather, an insight into the nature of identity. Cunningham's explanation of the insight conflicts with the facts of life, as Winters points out, but one might also argue that it is in the nature of this type of insight to do so. The Christian insight into what is essential of human identity stands, arguably, in equal conflict with the world we know.

The poem enlarges upon the insufficiency of reason put forward in "Haecceity." Said Cunningham earlier, "Reason can see only its own construction, and one's notion of identity is such a construction" (Collected Essays 422). In "the real pool," such a perfect construction is impossible because of the random and incalculable ripples, though they be "as minute as skimming flies." To say these ripples "exemplify no given rule" is to say, at least, that reason can comprehend neither the attributes nor the sources of the forces that act upon the "fiction" it constructs, the ruled construction it imposes on experience. Reality is finally incomprehensible, not comprehensible or "given," or, ultimately, susceptible to reason.

Winters' criticism of the poem's method seems largely justified. The pool is, as he says, little more than "the occasion for the sermon." The first line of the poem is

prosaic, and it is unclear what "a pure frame" around a pool would be, yet one is invited to visualize a pool for the sake of the argument. But a pool in which one seeks one's reflection seems otherwise a legitimate image to employ in an exploration of identity. The unrippled pool reflects one concept of identity, "This mirror of the vision of my name." The characteristics of the willowed pool represent qualifications to the description of identity the poet in the first line calls "a fiction." Contrary to Winters' remark, the pool and the argument do "fuse into a single successful being" (Forms 303) in the third stanza. For one to make sense of this stanza, one must grasp the significance of the water both as water in which one might drown and as the pool of experience, life, which carries with it the fact of death and the question of afterlife. This stanza, opening up for consideration the possibility that identity will be revealed in death, furthers the argument rather than "crowds it out."

The poems we have examined in this chapter are concerned with what is ultimate or essential, and it is in this context that one might understand the statement "our experience does not validate induction," although, taken from this context, the clause might well be construed to eliminate any justification for poetry. Cunningham's later poetry focusses more directly on the attitudes one assumes to the conditions of life, conditions that poems like these contemplate in the largest sense. One is cautioned,

however, not to disengage Cunningham's poetry at any stage from this larger informing vision.

CHAPTER V

SOLIPSISM

One of the distinguishing attitudes in Cunningham's poetry is his refusal to record sensation passively. Experience for him is inseparable from the identity informing it, just as other apparent dualities are meaningful only in their union, a notion that comes forward in the final stanza of the last poem we examined:

> I know both what I see
> And what I think, to alter and to be,
> And the vision
> Of this informs that vision of confusion.

The poetic rendering of experience necessitates the reasoned judgment of perception, a measured balance of subjectivity and objectivity. Cunningham explains this at some length in The Journal of John Cardan:

> No one will deny, what is overwhelmingly obvious, the immediacy and absoluteness in itself of one's primary experience. But this is by definition self-sealed, isolated, and incommunicable, whether this be its glory or its defect. To speak or to think or to write is to go beyond this, and even to risk--to put to the wager--this. For to write is to confront one's primary experience with the externally objective: first, with the facts of experience and with the norms of possibility and probability of experience; secondly, with the objective commonality of language and literary forms. To be successful in this enterprise is to integrate the subjectively primary, the immediate, with the objectively communicable, the mediate, to the alteration of both by their conformation to each other, by their connexity with and their immanence in each other. It is the conquest of

> solipsism, the dramatic conflict of self with, on the one hand, reality in all its objectivity and potentiality, and, on the other with philology in its old and general sense; or, with private and with public history. (Collected Essays 427)

When Cunningham states, then, that "the poet's opponent is experience," he means not only his personal, private experience but also the collective, public experience: "reality in all its objectivity and potentiality." At the heart of the poetic struggle or exploration, what Cunningham called earlier "the game the two of them play," is "the conquest of solipsism," the struggle against self-centredness in the deepest sense. In our times, however, when "personal development" and "spiritual growth" are matters of much (usually meaningless) chatter, solipsism flourishes as people are encouraged to ignore objective reality and to focus instead on something known more or less as "the divine inner self." The encouragement stems in part from the Romantic notion that divine inspiration somehow found its source in, or at least coincided with, the focussing on immediate sensation. This same tenet survives, perhaps to a greater degree, in Modernism. It is a tacit assumption, for example, in Pound's "In a Station of the Metro":

> The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
> Petals on a wet, black bough.

The informing principle of such a poem, devotion to subjective impulse, is as much in contrast with the conquest of solipsism as the form of the poem (or lack of form,

since, grammatically, the poem makes no explicit statement) is opposed to what one would call objective or rational form:

> . . . we must not forget that this quality, form, is not something outside the poet, something "aesthetic," and superimposed upon his moral content; it is essentially a part, in fact it may be the decisive part, of the moral content, even though the poet may be arriving at the final perfection of the condition he is communicating while he communicates and in large measure as a result of the act and technique of communication. (Defense 22)

"In a Station of the Metro" offers no rational progression of thought, though it suggests a link of some sort between the two phrases, so the reader is invited to exercise the principle of sympathetic insight or of imaginative transformation at the expense of the principle of responsibility to the external fact. The objective commonality of language, which leads one to expect the completion of a statement, is here overridden. A statement is implied in the semicolon, but the lack of a verb eliminates the specificity necessary for the reader to be both imaginative and conscious of external reality; the details of objective reality as must be represented in the commonality of language are not present. The method of the poem, then, forces the reader imaginatively to link or fuse the two phrases in some idiosyncratic construction unsusceptible to critical, moral, meaningful examination. There is implied in this method a pseudo-spiritual notion that such constructions are self-evidently important and

valid, however fantastic, illogical, or finally insignificant they might appear to anyone other than the poet.

I say this by way of approaching one of Cunningham's most important statements: "judgment and sympathy [are] terms of the same order" (Collected Essays 424), his final observation in The Quest of the Opal, and one that hearkens back to his earlier statement that the "two fundamental principles of morality in the Western tradition" are dignity and love. The statement about judgment and sympathy is not especially difficult to understand, nor is it likely to spark much controversy. But it is rather unfashionable, because, while "judgment" has lost much of the awe-inspiring power it once commanded, and, hence, much of its credibility, sympathy has gained in stature, though it seems little understood. It is a matter of common practice nowadays to sympathize but not to judge, and it is a practice that reflects one aspect of the spiritualization of the subjective impulse evident in the poetry of our times. In the two poems I wish to examine next, we see how solipsism involves the loss of personal responsibility to the external fact, a loss made more likely by the denigration of judgment as a moral concept. It is represented in the following poem as something like what once was called "damnation."

The Solipsist

There is no moral treason;
Others are you. Your hence
Is personal consequence;
Desire is reason.

There is no moral strife.
None falls in the abysm
Who dwells there, solipsism
His way of life.

Robert Stein makes a pertinent point about religious influences in Cunningham's poetry:

> What is particularly characteristic of his introspective wisdom is his further observation that 'the traditional patterns of feeling still [have] power to dominate him.' Precisely this circumstance--his leaving one cloister and not joining any other, his strong awareness of what has been lost and what persists, while no new faith has formed--underlies all his work. Few poems deal directly with religious themes, yet generally they are born of a sense of loss, attending without nostalgia or regret to the past and its consequences. (3)

This poem employs religious concepts, most notably evident in the word "abysm," to present solipsism, an unending surrender of the self to the self, as hell. The solipsist has reneged on moral duty and given up moral strife, but it is in moral strife that the self can be released from its own stranglehold.

Cunningham has focussed in this poem on key components in the beliefs of many contemporary spiritual revivalists. One supposes he knew quite a good deal about that topic:

> . . . that recurrent American phenomenon, Revivalism, which recently possessed the educated classes--a revivalism, however, without Christianity, without established places to put and to structure our irrationalities, that range

> from astrology and witchcraft to the science fiction revelation of technology. (Collected Essays 440-441)

In any case, the first stanza bluntly paraphrases a popular perversion, the belief that the universe lies within and that through appropriate self-discovery one can shape one's own "reality," virtually without restriction. (This, I can say as one who has studied the subject a great deal, is a much more prevalent undercurrent of belief than one might hope for or imagine.)

The belief is related to and is in some measure a consequence of what Cunningham diagnoses as an informing principle in much contemporary poetry, the "scarcely scrutinized proposition that regularity is meaningless and irregularity meaningful--to the subversion of Form" (Collected Essays 248). The invitation to find meaning more or less exclusively in the exercise of the imagination has as its logical consequence the belief that all meaning is to be found there. The imagination is infinitely "irregular" and can invent causation or find coincidence in the merest hint of information and, unrestricted by responsibility to external fact, will eventually subvert all it encounters to its own fantasy.

Betrayal is impossible, then, to a true solipsist because good and evil are terms of the same order. (Those who believe that all is the self consider use of the terms "good" and "evil" bad form; such terms suggest a moral absolutism opposed to this cherished relativism.) "Others

are you" is taken literally by proponents of this doctrine: everything, to one indulging this fantasy, merely reflects one's progress or lack of progress toward perfect selfhood. The solipsist's "hence" is only "personal consequence"; he cannot recognize the moral structures required for the necessary civilizing allegiance to community.

The fact of consequence is turned on the solipsist in the second stanza. Consequence is inescapable; only the solipsist's self-centredness prevents him from seeing its effects: "None falls in the abysm/ Who dwells there." Solipsism here is a variety of unconsciousness: if to him "Desire is reason," the solipsist remains in the moral condition usually reserved for beasts.

Solipsism as a perversion of the religious impulse is not without its temples, priests, or baptism. Cunningham is at his wittiest in "The True Religion," wherein he details the solipsist's confessional.

> The New Religion is the True,
> A transformation overdue,
> A thorough Freudly Reformation
> Based like the old on a translation.
> Their fear is our anxiety,
> Our complex their humility.
> The virtuous are now repressed,
> The penitent are now depressed,
> Even the elect are simply manic,
> And chastity is pansy-panic.
>
> In brief, the Convert is a Case.
> He puts away all else to face
> Reality with the paralysis
> Of a seven year depth analysis.
> He does not see but he is heard.
> He is transferred and untransferred.
> He has aggressions and no malice,
> And phallic symbols and no phallus.

This poem ridicules the doctrinization or religification of perhaps useful but limited theories of psychoanalysis. The effect of the "thorough Freudly Reformation" has been the negation of man as an independent moral being; he is, like a machine, merely a collection of causes and effects, at times in need of a little tuning. There are some lovely touches in the poem, such as the fourth line, which, while ironically pointing out a similarity, calls into doubt both the New and the Old, but especially the New. Since the similarity is merely superficial, its ironic employment makes the New appear merely ridiculous.

The first stanza offers a point-by-point comparison of the New and the Old, proceeding from the general to the specific in a tone that condemns the trivialization of the religious impulse. One sees the old concepts in a new guise, only now the belief in spirit that informed the old concepts has been replaced by an appeal to the divine inner self. The "they" in "Their fear" are those who believed in the old religion; the "we" in "Our complex" are the new believers. From the "virtuous" to "the elect" we note a heightening effect, established by the repeated syntax culminating in "Even." The stanza's last line, condensing tomes of psychoanalytic jargon into the mocking alliteration of "pansy-panic," points out the absurdity in classic Cunningham style.

"In brief," then, "the Convert is a Case," makes the parallels perfectly clear. The line "He is transferred and

untransferred," building on "heard," connotes a mystical atmosphere, something of a mockery of the Mass, and adds an ominous tone to the disturbing portrait of the "case": a creature with only the shadow of a soul and only the shadow of a man, weak and impotent.

CHAPTER VI

INDIFFERENCE

With the recovery of the method of direct statement there appears in Cunningham's poetry the attitude of indifference, an attitude similar to but more fixed than the resignation apparent in "For My Contemporaries." Winters supposes this attitude to be "perhaps a more resigned and more mature form of the doctrine of hatred"--"The doctrine, briefly . . . is that hatred is the only cleansing emotion and the most moral of emotions" (Forms 305). Hatred, as Winters goes on to say, "has its justification in experience," and Cunningham seems to have formulated from his experience an attitude that mellows the impulse toward hatred with a certain stoicism. Indifference can be misunderstood as a cynical dismissal of the good one should strive for, but this is not what the poet intends. Indifference is a solid philosophical position, not a retreat or a reaction, but an understandable consequence of the views the poet has earlier expressed.

The attitude of indifference is best stated in Epigram 10 of "A Century of Epigrams" in The Collected Poems and Epigrams of J. V. Cunningham.

> If Wisdom, as it seems it is,
> Be the recovery of some bliss
> From the conditions of disaster--

Terror the servant, man the master--
It does not follow we should seek
Crises to prove ourselves unweak.
Much of our lives, God knows, is error,
But who will trifle with unrest?
These fools who would solicit terror,
Obsessed with being unobsessed,
Professionals of experience
Who have disasters to withstand them
As if fear never had unmanned them,
Flaunt a presumptuous innocence.

I have preferred indifference.

The poem is about the gaining of wisdom, and it specifically confronts the popular notion that there is a direct relationship between objective or physical experience and the gaining of wisdom or peace of mind, "the recovery of some bliss." More exactly, the poet finds a logical flaw in the belief that one should seek experience to become wise. Striving to overcome the conditions of existence in order thereby to prove oneself "manly" is actually childish and foolish. "It does not follow," because such a position "flaunts a presumptuous innocence." Those who seek experience in this manner, one may infer from this, are fundamentally inexperienced in that they have not addressed any deeper significance than the merely physical or worldly.

That deeper significance is implied in the clause "Much of our lives, God knows, is error." This recalls the doctrine that all choice is error, which seemed to be an argument against spiritual pride, an overweening faith in the ultimate reasonableness of existence. Something of this doctrine is carried forward in this epigram in that something like spiritual pride is, implicitly, what

motivates the "professionals of experience." Cunningham sees those so motivated as "trifling with unrest," unable to be at peace with the conditions of existence. "Trifle" both supports the suggestion of childishness and argues for interpreting the poem as an important philosophical statement; Cunningham is not interested in trifling with experience but in finding what it holds that is lasting and worthwhile. The subject and tone of the poem urge one to consider "indifference" as an important attitude arrived at after sober consideration of the futility of human action brought forward in the statement "Much of our lives, God knows, is error."

In his comment on the poem, Thom Gunn seems to suggest that indifference is more of a reactionary position than a positive statement:

> He could be said, however, to have . . . an impatience with gratuitous displays of feeling, and ultimately with any kind of phoniness. With Cunningham, the impatience most commonly takes the form of exasperation with the Romantic search after experience for its own sake. Rather than be one of the "Professionals of experience," he says, "I have preferred indifference." Indifference is itself an evil, of course, being only at the opposite extreme, but at least it is something to be <u>preferred</u>, in that it avoids all the further vices that the pursuit of experience will lead to. (127)

That Gunn sees Cunningham's position "at the opposite extreme" may indicate that he confuses the use of indifference to mean unconcern or apathy with its more appropriate meaning here as "The fact of making no difference; unimportance" (<u>O.E.D.</u>). Gunn suggests

indifference is, in fact, a cynical dismissal of good or a synonym for despair: "[it] is itself an evil." Indifference is indeed the opposite of "unrest," a description of motivation that seeks to discover meaning only in the material or physical, but it is not only that. In promoting indifference, the poet recognizes the struggle to overcome self-deception as of a greater order than merely surviving the particulars of experience. "These fools," the professionals of experience, are finally a variety of solipsists. The obsessive quest for experience is based on a notion of human life as no greater than the sum of its parts: people are merely a product of what has happened to them. But if there were not innate in the human mind a capacity for self-deception, then all experience would hold little opportunity for learning. Given this capacity, no experience need be futile. And, given this, the obsession with ever greater, ever more dangerous or thrilling experience is mere hedonism.

Gunn's comments seem to have been influenced by his finding special emphasis on the mention of preference: "I have preferred indifference." But, while "preferred" is heavily stressed, one might argue that the second syllable of "indifference" receives the single greatest stress in the final line. This comes about because the word draws one's attention as a summary of Cunningham's argument and because it rhymes with "innocence" and "experience." Since it goes without saying that the poet prefers something to the

attitude taken by "these fools," what he prefers is also what matters.

The attitude of indifference necessitates a certain self-contained composure, confirmed in an earlier poem, "Autumn."

> Gather the heart! The leaves
> Fall in the red day. Grieves
> No man more than the season.
> Indifference is my guide.
>
> Heart mellow and hope whirling
> In a wild autumn hurling
> Is time, and not time's treason.
> And fatigue is my bride.
>
> But say what moralist
> Shall in himself subsist?
> The tried. And you, occasion,
> Far in my heart shall hide.
>
> I have watched trains recede
> Into that distance. Heed,
> O heed not their persuasion
> Who in no lands abide!

The position taken in the poem is related to that of "To the Reader," one which "draws abstractions from the experience and discards the experience itself" (Forms 301). The poem describes the poet's decision to adopt an attitude that prefers the consciously secured to the sensory and transient, a decision to separate occasion from its essence and to retain the essence as occasion is dispersed.

Cunningham calls "Autumn" "a poem just short of successful, in which the whole manner of the quest was devoted to acquiescence in what amounted to its abandonment." The "abandonment" would appear to be the poet's abandonment of the pursuit of sensibility, and the

"acquiescence" his subsequent adoption of the attitude of indifference:

> Here experience has ripened for the harvest, the time of falling leaves, the time of acceptance--even of indifference--when grief is subdued to the resignation of the season. For the mellowing of the heart and the parallel dispersal of hope . . . is only what should be expected from the passing of time. . . . And so you may object that no sound moralist should retire and live sufficient to himself, seeking, as it were, a cloistered virtue. He answered that this is but the necessary act of the man of experience, the tried. . . . He is acquainted with the occasion of adventure whose symbol is the passing train, but he will not heed their persuasion for he knows there is in them no abiding rest. (Collected Essays 416)

The mention of the "dispersal of hope" in this quotation does suggest, as it seems Gunn implies, that indifference is a variety of despair, except that "dispersal of hope" is linked here to "the mellowing of the heart," a phrase that suggests merely the abandonment of an immature hope or ambition and not the rejection of all belief in goodness. The quest of sensibility proved a failure, and the poet puts it behind him. He rejects experience for its own sake and adopts the attitude of indifference, an attitude that recognizes that wisdom or peace of mind does not reside in physical experience. The four stanzas of the poem formulate "a certain scheme of experience" that explains the decision.

The first stanza talks about the need to appraise experience--"Gather the heart"--in the association of autumn and harvest. The tone, of acceptance of the natural order, discounts rebellion: "Grieves/ No man more than the season." The attitude of indifference is assumed, given

this association, to be of the natural order as well, a guide that, implicitly, can show the way to a more achieved experience of life, necessitated by the passing away of another type of experience or pursuit.

Something of the futility of rebellion is carried forward in the second stanza. In the line "And fatigue is my bride," one has the sense of a man driven to exhaustion with the details of sensory experience but finding in his exhaustion a sense of composure and propriety. The composure is indicated in "Heart mellow," the propriety in the poet's appeal to time. That he is being loyal to himself and to the natural order appears to be what "not time's treason" means: he is not treasonous to time but obeying its forceful command, because it is forceful but also because it is proper to do so.

This is a less assured poem than the later epigram inasmuch as it relies on less objective matter. The statements here proceed from the personal pronoun rather than toward it. Consequently, in the later epigram, the attitude of indifference is stated more forcefully. The images in the poem (the leaves, the receding trains) are not particularly compelling. If anything, falling leaves are rather a cliche. The image of the receding trains has some power, though the vagueness of the phrase "that distance" tends to dissipate it. The image, with its ominous connotations of a voyage of no return, is sublimated to the poem's larger philosophical statement. As Cunningham's

poetry moves continually and inexorably toward precise definition of attitude and idea, sensory details give way.

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

Cunningham's poems represent a victory over many things. His earliest work shows him to be a man of principle. Though deeply immersed in a current of poetic thought that would have had him abandon the forms he had so mastered, he adhered to the standards he set for himself as a professional. His disciplined adherence to these standards led him through a difficult and complicated phase in his work, as he discusses in The Quest of the Opal, until, as he puts it, "He returned to himself." It is the very conscious choice of action represented in his decision to be "one to whom poetry was verse" that enables him later to speak of his discoveries during the period to which The Quest of the Opal applies. For in attempting to apply form to sensibility Cunningham discovers his own strengths as a poet and arrives at significant conclusions that apply to the progression of poetry in this century. The poems in the order in which I have presented them demonstrate a talent developing in accordance with the highest standards. The scope of their achievement lies in their exploration of a range of human experience; their value lies in their striving to find meaning in that experience.

One may take any of the epigrams--number six, for

example--and consider its achievement.

> I don't know what I am. I think I know
> Much of the circumstance in which I flow.
> But knowledge is not power; I am that flow
> Of history and of percept which I know.

One distinctive aspect of the form of the poem is that two words, "know" and "flow," rhyme four lines. Having the single word "know" end both the first and the last lines gives the epigram a kind of enclosed or sealed quality, which is pertinent here to the subject matter. Similarly, having the internal lines both end with "flow" emphasizes the word in a way pertinent to the meaning the poem brings to it. The poem deals with certain demarcations of human power and consciousness, and these demarcations are underlined implicitly in the sense of enclosure effected by the positions of these two words.

The poem has three sentences and four independent clauses, two to each two lines. The third clause is introduced by a conjunction, separated from the fourth by a semicolon. The grammatical structure supports or reinforces a rational process of refinement or of logical deduction. Each sentence is longer and more complicated than the one before it, refining the subject within the confines of the "sealed" form enforced by the rhyme scheme.

The poem explores the subject of identity: "I don't know what I am." First of all, knowledge is limited to knowledge of circumstance, "in which I flow." Circumstance is a combination of "history and percept"--external action

and mental abstraction. The identity "flows," alters and progresses, inasmuch as "knowledge" is capable of comprehending it. What one becomes most aware of in the poem are the confines of knowledge. Each sentence is governed by some statement of the limitations of knowledge: in the first sentence the poet says, "I don't know"; in the second, "I think I know"; and in the third, "which I know." At the same time, the poem moves toward redefining the statement "I don't know" in more specific terms.

The poem subordinates knowledge to power. The first two lines tell us that the poet has no objective basis for self-knowledge; the nature of his being, "what I am," is hidden from him. Any self-knowledge he may purport to have is, finally, a matter of supposition: "I think I know." This notion hearkens back to the ideas contained in "Reason and Nature." The notion of identity as a flow is similar to that brought forward by the "real pool" in which the ripples and movements "exemplify no given rule." We might understand "knowledge is not power" then as a restatement of "reason can see only its own construction," a belief further refined in the last sentence of this epigram. "I am that flow/ Of history and of percept which I know" is very much like "I know both what I see/ And what I think" from "Reason and Nature." "And the vision/ Of this informs that vision of confusion" is rather like "I am that flow . . . which I know," in that both lines stake out a certain territory for the comprehension of identity within the confines of a

system which puts no faith in the reasoned construction of identity except inasmuch as it posits a certain structure or stakes out a certain territory. Identity is a construction which "informs that vision of confusion," the imperceivable totality of being. It has no objective basis for existence except as such a construction. It is not a thing or a "what" as in "what I am" that one can discuss except as a kind of moving reference point.

In four short, albeit very dense, lines then the poet expresses a profound insight in a way that is at once accessible and virtually unassailable. Much modern writing derives from a similar insight; the notion of "stream of consciousness" writing bespeaks something of what Cunningham's epigram expresses. But little modern writing has come to grips with the disciplined precision necessary to express such an insight without, one might say, falling prey to it. Pound's "In a Station of the Metro," for example, demonstrates a certain insight into the flow of consciousness, but it tries more to imitate the experience of this insight or to evoke it than to state it clearly and explicitly. One might, conceivably, be moved by Pound's poem, but it is unlikely one would be satisfied by it. The mind demands that an insight submit to rigorous analysis in order to be satisfied, if satisfaction is possible. Such rigorous analysis is facilitated in Cunningham's poem: the concise balance of statement and the positioning of words enhance the epigram's capacity to further the communication

of the insight it seeks to express in a way that can satisfy the human need to find meaning both in the exercise of sympathetic insight and in respect for the external fact.

Cunningham's achievements in this regard make him, I believe, a significant figure. What one sees in Epigram Six and others like it is an attempt at the rational or objective treatment of matter other modern poets have left to subjective interpretation. In the discipline of verse, Cunningham has constructed a moral base which allows him to entertain virtually any idea or doctrine within the confines of the two principles of morality he has outlined. These "confines" then are not really confining but liberating; they enable the intelligent treatment of any subject. A large part of Modernism, on the other hand, though it entertains insights and ideas that merit examination, has abandoned the poetic structures necessary for examining these insights and ideas and has not established any new structures. So while Modernists may talk of freedom from limitation, to some extent limitation is freedom: only within some kind of structure can one begin to find meaning. Modernism, in large part, posits meaning in the elimination of structure, and this, as Cunningham has said, is an increasingly futile pursuit.

There is something warmly human about Cunningham's poetry that would be lacking in a "formalist" poet or a moral poet who merely shunned the world of experience altogether. Cunningham claims in "Autumn" to have put

"occasion/ Far in my heart," but in so doing he does not deny occasion; he subsumes it to its essence. The variety of human experience interests Cunningham, and he is not anyone's idea of a saint, as he says in Epigram Fifty-Six, "On Doctor Drink," in answer to a reader's criticism of his book.

> The trivial, vulgar and exalted jostle
> Each other in a way to make the apostle
> Of culture and right feeling shudder faintly.
> It is a shudder that affects the saintly.
> It is a shudder by which I am faulted.
> I like the trivial, vulgar, and exalted.
> (lines 7-12)

Morality, for Cunningham, is a gate that opens into meaning, not that shuts meaning out. He warns against the wooden, self-righteous variety of morality that centers on condemnation: "So a scrupulosity toward experience promotes scandal, and a scrupulosity towards scandal invites inertia, or dignity devoid of quickness and virtue" (Collected Essays 427). Inertia, like passivity, is not one of Cunningham's traits. The subject matter of the epigrams is astonishingly varied, and the epigrams themselves are witty and incisive:

66

> Your affair, my dear, need not be a mess.
> See at the next table with what finesse,
> With what witty tensions and what tense wit,
> As intricate as courtship, the love-fated
> Sir Gawain and the Fay at lunch commit
> Faithful adultery unconsummated.

Cunningham frequently demonstrates a self-deprecating sense of humor, as well, that is both charming and refreshing, next to the turgid self-seriousness of so many modern

writers:

14

On the cover of my first book

This garish and red cover made me start.
I who amused myself with quietness
Am here discovered. In this flowery dress
I read the wild wallpaper of my heart.

77

I write you in my need. Please write
As simply, in terms black and white,
And do not fear hyperbole,
Uncompromising Flattery!
I can believe the best of me.

One finds in Cunningham a range of emotions that are both comprehensible and achieved. It is a very great achievement to feel the proper way under the proper circumstances, because to do so necessitates the balanced appraisal of circumstance made possible only with the prolonged and conscientious exercise of the two fundamental principles of morality.

Cunningham exits on a note of tongue-in-cheek satisfaction, ironically modest. It is a pleasant note, I think, because it does not aim at anything more than has already been achieved. His poems written, his work done, the poet sees no need to impose himself, and so retires:

Reader, goodbye. While my associates
Redeem the world in moral vanity
Or live the casuistry of an affair
I shall go home: bourbon and beer at five,
Some money, some prestige, some love, some sex,
My input and my output satisfactory.

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APPENDIX

Montana Pastoral

I am no shepherd of a child's surmises.
I have seen fear where the coiled serpent rises,

Thirst where the grasses burn in early May
And thistle, mustard, and the wild oat stay.

There is dust in this air. I saw in the heat
Grasshoppers busy in the threshing wheat.

So to this hour. Through the warm dusk I drove
To blizzards sifting on the hissing stove,

And found no images of pastoral will,
But fear, thirst, hunger, and this huddled chill.

Noon

I have heard the self's stir,
Anonymous
And low, as on the stair
At time of Angelus

The worshippers repeat
An exorcism,
The angled clock's repute
Conjured with chrism.

For My Contemporaries

How time reverses
The proud in heart!
I now make verses
Who aimed at art.

But I sleep well.
Ambitious boys
Whose big lines swell
With spiritual noise,

Despite me not,
And be not queasy
To praise somewhat:
Verse is not easy.

But rage who will.
Time that procured me
Good sense and skill
Of madness cured me.

Haecceity

Evil is any this or this
Pursued beyond hypothesis.

It is the scribbling of affection
On the blank pages of perfection.

Evil is presentness bereaved
Of all the futures it conceived,

Wilful and realized restriction
Of the insatiate forms of fiction.

It is this poem or this act.
It is this absolute of fact.

Agnosco Veteris Vestigia Flammae

I have been here. Dispersed in meditation,
I sense the traces of the old surmise--
Passion dense as fatigue, faithful as pain,
As joy foreboding. O my void, my being
In the suspended sources of experience,
Massive in promise, unhistorical
Being of unbeing, of all futures full,
Unrealized in none, how love betrays you,
Turns you to process and a fluid fact
Whose future specifies its past, whose past
Precedes it, and whose history is its being.

Reason and Nature

This pool in a pure frame,
This mirror of the vision of my name,
  Is a fiction
On the unrippled surface of reflection.

I see a willowed pool
Where the flies skim. Its angles have no rule.
  In no facet
Is the full vision imaged or implicit.

I've heard, in such a place
Narcissus sought the vision of his face.
  If the water
Concealed it, could he, drowning, see it better?

I know both what I see
And what I think, to alter and to be,
  And the vision
Of this informs that vision of confusion.

The Solipsist

There is no moral treason;
Others are you. Your <u>hence</u>
Is personal consequence;
Desire is reason.

There is no moral strife.
None falls in the abysm
Who dwells there, solipsism
His way of life.

The True Religion

The New Religion is the True,
A transformation overdue,
A thorough Freudly Reformation
Based like the old on a translation.
Their fear is our anxiety,
Our complex their humility.
The virtuous are now repressed,
The penitent are now depressed,
Even the elect are simply manic,
And chastity is pansy-panic.

In brief, the Convert is a Case.
He puts away all else to face
Reality with the paralysis
Of a seven year depth analysis.
He does not see but he is heard.
He is transferred and untransferred.
He has aggressions and no malice,
And phallic symbols and no phallus.

10

If Wisdom, as it seems it is,
Be the recovery of some bliss
From the conditions of disaster--
Terror the servant, man the master--
It does not follow we should seek
Crises to prove ourselves unweak.
Much of our lives, God knows, is error,
But who will trifle with unrest?
These fools who would solicit terror,
Obsessed with being unobsessed,
Professionals of experience
Who have disasters to withstand them
As if fear never had unmanned them,
Flaunt a presumptuous innocence.

Autumn

Gather the heart! The leaves
Fall in the red day. Grieves
No man more than the season.
Indifference is my guide.

Heart mellow and hope whirling
In a wild autumn hurling
Is time, and not time's treason.
And fatigue is my bride.

<u>But say what moralist</u>
<u>Shall in himself subsist</u>?
The tried. And you, occasion,
Far in my heart shall hide.

I have watched trains recede
Into that distance. Heed,
O heed not their persuasion
Who in no lands abide!

6

I don't know what I am. I think I know
Much of the circumstance in which I flow.
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Of history and of percept which I know.

On Doctor Drink

The trivial, vulgar and exalted jostle
Each other in a way to make the apostle
Of culture and right feeling shudder faintly.
It is a shudder that affects the saintly.
It is a shudder by which I am faulted.
I like the trivial, vulgar, and exalted.
(lines 7-12)

66

Your affair, my dear, need not be a mess.
See at the next table with what finesse,
With what witty tensions and what tense wit,
As intricate as courtship, the love-fated
Sir Gawain and the Fay at lunch commit
Faithful adultery unconsummated.

14

On the cover of my first book

This garish and red cover made me start.
I who amused myself with quietness
Am here discovered. In this flowery dress
I read the wild wallpaper of my heart.

77

I write you in my need. Please write
As simply, in terms black and white,
And do not fear hyperbole,
Uncompromising Flattery!
I can believe the best of me.

Reader, goodbye. While my associates
Redeem the world in moral vanity
Or live the casuistry of an affair
I shall go home: bourbon and beer at five,
Some money, some prestige, some love, some sex,
My input and my output satisfactory.